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ABSTRACT

China and Russia generally adhere to the Leninist concept of the press as being integral to society and therefore subject to regulation. They both also contend with the Communist paradox: the press exists to criticize the system of which it is a part. They reconcile this paradox by directing criticism toward the erring individual rather than toward the Communist Party itself. The major problems hindering freedom of information in the two nations fall into four categories: news standards (by whom is news defined); access to news (who gets what news as decided by the government); censorship; and cultural differences and national biases. (TJ)

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Problems in International Communication:

China and the Soviet Union

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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The enormous areas and immense populations of China and the U.S.S.R, together with the fact that they sustain planned societies -- contrary to the world's haphazard history -- guarantee international news value. Add the fact that these Socialist giants openly deride each other and the news potential swells.

As recently as Aug. 1, 1978, Chinese Defense Minister Hsu Hsiang-chien used the Chinese military newspaper, People's Liberation Army Daily , currently a favorite place to leak official attitudes, to label the U.S.S.R. China's "main enemy" and call for closer ties with Washington. On Aug. 4, Prayda, the Soviet Communist Party newspaper, shot back. "The Chinese leaders are trying as best they can to frustrate the detente process, are openly putting the question of recarving the world's map in their favor."

The Associated Press dutifully reported both volleys, citing the printed sources. But is this news ? Is it mere recycled rhetoric ? Is it armchair reporting ? Media critics are quick to cite the shortcomings of international coverage, yet considering the realities of the work, reporting the exchange of international jibes is news -- and surely in the context of East-West summitry. However, whether it is the best possible reportage from such complex arenas, whether it spreads heat rather than light, whether it routinely chokes foreign news budgets and bores readers may be debated.Nonetheless, considering the current problems in international communication, the world's largest Socialist nations undoubtedly typify the peculiar challenges in the exchange of news among nations.

Before specific news-gathering problems, it may be useful to take a late-summer reading on major issues influencing the news in China and the Soviet Union. China is free of the Gang of Four but still uses them to rally public spirit

in the on-going "long march" toward a perfected Socialist state, and it still uses them as scapegoats for many major and minor national problems. The country has made the leadership transition from Chairman Mao to Chairman Hua readily enough, although factional infighting in the upper Communist party ranks is said to continue only slightly less actively than before the presumably unifying party congress in March of this year. Public attention is increasingly directed toward higher production and technological progress. National self-sufffciency by the turn of the century is a major goal, couched in such ominous but ubiquitous slogans as "The country not developed is vulnerable to attack." A twin aim is international recognition and prestige. The need to be influential may account for China's brief and overwhelming shower of attention to little Albania -- a classic case of saturation turned to overkill and a situation which will undoubtedly influence China's Third World relations. While the Albanian experience ended sourly (the Albanians are "ingrates", the Chinese press reported) the matter has also helped to refocus attention on China's push for "normalization" of relations with the United States. The free enchange of news, and journalists, is, of course, implied in the normalization package.

The Soviet Union's leadership is still bruised from the world's reaction to the dissident trials and by the mutually stubborn bargaining by Americans and Soviets in the Strategic Arms Limitations talks. While "slander and defamation" (not libel, as the US press persistently reports) charges against two AMerican journalists have had wide attention at home, the matter has a pro forma ring in the Soviet Union. Obviously many AMericans are glad that fines and court costs are paid but that the U.S. journalists have made no retractions. Soviet leadership, however, is more concerned with two other related matters. One is the fact that Communists abroad, particularly in France, Italy, and Great Britain, split with the U.S.S.R. on the human rights issue. The other is the possibility that economic

sanctions may be used to counter pressures exerted against foreign nationals. The current case involving an International Harvester executive may be a test of wills. At any rate, increasingly bureaucratically topheavy and mired in a sluggish economy, the Soviet Union will probably seek closer association with the United States. Although uneasy with the lack of unanimity among the Carter administration's spokesmen, the Soviets have little choice but to try to renew detente. If so, the news flow will probably increase markedly in volume. The quality of story opportunity -- interviews with top leaders, access to official records, greater freedom for internal travel -- will very likely also improve the lot of correspondents.

While it is elementary to say that both China and the Soviet Union generally adhere to the Leninist concept of the press as integral to society and hence subject to regulation in a planned society, they both also contend with the Communist paradox: the press exists to criticize the system of which it is a part. Irreconcilable ? Not if one notices that criticism is largely directed toward the erring individual in society's new structure rather than toward the Communist Party itself. Wrong-doers of every stripe (such as the Gang of Four in China or under-productive wheat farmers in the U.S.S.R.) are cited in the press because they hinder progress along the pre-determined Communist route. The Soviet dissidents have posed a threat to internal control of the Soviet Union by party leadership. Soviet journalists -- despite the fact that fewer than 20% are party members themselves -- have followed party direction and retaliated in vitriolic stories. The foreign correspondents of democratic nations, a few of whom admit knowing that they have been the targets of staged demonstrations by dissidents, have told the dissenters' stories and pay the price in bureaucratic harassment. A correspondent, since departed from Moscow, has described to me his view that the familiar Soviet charge against foreign journalists, currency manipulation, probably <u>does</u> stay within the strict

confines of Soviet monetary regulations. However, it is not the black market profiteering that might be assumed. More likely it is part of a finer ethical dilema for foreign journalists in the U.S.S.R.: the temptation to offer financial relief to dissidents, many of whom lose all employment once their views become known, without at the same time "buying news." Evidently checkbook journalism complicates reporting abroad as well as at home.

Considering China and the U.S.S.R. today, the major problems hindering freedom of information seem to me to fall into four categories. The first is news standards. By what is news defined, and by whom ? Although in America we do not have a consistent or universally accepted definition of news, we are surprised that the Soviet Union and China do. In theory at least, they adhere more literally than we do to a need-to-know principle. Their citizens are told in the press what they need to know to become productive members of a Communist state. The distinction, of course, is that the decisions as to what this is are made by the state's bureaucracy itself, not by a press presumed to be separate from the state and serving as its watchdog.

As Liu Ching-shi, deputy chief editor of Shanghai's Daily News (Wenhui Bao)told me positively, "It is the journalist's main task to pass on to the masses the party line, principles, policies and tasks completely and accurately. (Foreigners are not allowed to acquire copies of his newspaper, incidentally.) The problem is in the application of the news definistion, but obviously the quality and quantity of news from nations with a Communist party press is determined by standards incompatible with democratic expectations. Where free-flowing news is regarded as a threat to social order, rather than an inducement to it, as in the U.S.S.R and China, the application of alien news values is clearly threatening and is resisted.

Access to news is the second on-going problem. For one thing, official sources simply do not supply nor can correspondents expect news-on-demand. Certainly foreigners

are in no position to require that which is not available to a nation's own journalists. Yet it does happen. And the demand -- in part because of the competitive nature of news-gathering and the smallness of the foreign news hole in too many of the media -- is for headlines, for self-evident events, for symbolic stories. In-depth reporting from abroad is not in wide demand at home, at least not in America. Capsulized, simplistic news stories and "entertaining" features are still the bulk of what is sent among nations.

When foreign officialdom does not cooperate in supplying news, journalists depend more and more on private sources, with the attendant risks of accountability. As one television correspondent put it in Moscow, "If I didn't have my own connections, any tourist could locate as much news as I could." With Moscow, the absolute news central of the 15 Soviet republics, considered a hardship post and most foreign journalists on three year rotation there, clearly some sources have to be handed on to newcomers, others must be discovered on one's own. All of this, of course, is done under the chilling eye of a government that restrictd journalists territorially at will, controls visa applications and other travel permits capriciously, keeps foreign news organizations confined to cramped quarters in outlanders' apartment complexes and keeps journalists themselves discouraged from mingling socially or professionally with the native population. How infiltrated office staffs or press translators are by KBG agents or simply by party loyalists is another question.

Certainly in the dissemination of news the U.S.S.R. makes liberal use of Pravda and Izvestia to plant official party and government versions of the news. For other stories the bureaucracy favors the large press conference for its open-questions effect, but nonetheless it obviously uses the private tip and secret interview for slipping news to favored outlets. China, less sophisticated, still tends to use the official handout as the news equalizer -- except that some recipients get them sooner, some later, and more or less complete than others.

Favored nations, such as tiny Albania with its own news bureau in Peking, have at times known an absolute embarassment of journalistic riches.

In the American experience, Peking still operates behind some Great Wall of official silence. We do not even have a press officer at the U.S. Liaison Office but rather a political specialist who has press relations among his dutires. We, of course, have no accredited correspondents in the People's Republic of China, but then only 22 nations do have journalists there. Currently 43 correspondents represent 49 news organizations. (Despite their governments' mutual recriminations lately, TASS has two correspondents in Peking and the People's Republic of China has two in Moscow.)

International news access, undeniably, is a two way situation. In both the U.S.S.R and China there is the elitist paradox that allows the dissemination of world news from wire services and other sources among party, government and military leaders or others considered "reliable", while at the same time curtailing it to the masses who are constantly being reassured of their importance as citizens. What foreign news does go into mass circulation is too often arbitrarily chosen or serves some propaganda purpose -- sometimes beyond reason. For example, six days after the event there has been no mention in the Chinese press of Pope Paul's death.

In the Soviet Union the "white report" (also variously known) is a quite sophisticated daily round-up of world news and opinion circulated to the influential and reliable. It particularly guages the world's response to official Soviet policy. It probably accounts for why a certain bureaucrat in Siberia could be entirely candid when he told me that to his regret he had never seen a copy of the famous New York Times. Yet he could give with fair accuracy the gist of a Times editorial which had appeared two weeks earlier. The fact that the Communist news organizations regularly quote the democratic news sources does not necessarily accurate reporting.

News out of context can provide useful propaganda.

Peking's Blue News and Red News, each produced daily in several languages from "foreign agencies and press" (Blue) and Hsinhua, the official Chinese news agency (Red) are simplified versions -- again for the elite, including trusted tourists -- of a fairly complex official "underground" tabloid called Reference News (Tsan Kao Hsiao-hsi.) Definitely not available to foreigners, this four page foreign press report is produced in nine million copies daily. Clearly some Chinese are being kept informed about the world scene. HOwever, without public demand for such service there is little chance at present of expanded availability of news unless it should prove politically advantageous. As an inducement to "normalize" relations with America, news access will be a tool, not a social issue.

Even if questions of the access to and reliability of news sources were settled, those of official, unofficial and self-imposed censorship remain. To me they constitute the third major deterrent to the free flow of information among nations. It is abundantly clear as regimes like those of the Soviet Union and China become more experienced tha t heavy-handed official censorship, although it does exist, is used less frequently than is voluntary self-censorship. Surely that is common enough in the Soviet Union. Questions go unasked and stories unwritten by both domestic and foreign journalists simply because they would hit the stone wall of official silence or might call down offfcial ire, perhaps retaliation. "Maybe it's gutless," an American news bureau reporter told me, "but I know there are stories I can't write even if some 'usually reliable source' came down the chimney with all the facts in his hand. Not if I want to stay in Moscow, that is. The Kremlin could have me out of the country tomorrow if they really meant to."

The risks of the stories on the Jewish dissidents seem all the more daring at that rate. Several foreign reporters have left Moscow recently under the cloud of Soviet disapproval. As the Soviets see it, aside from the desperation of the dissidents

themselves, three causes explain the recurrent stories on dissent: a) the dissidents themselves have learned to stage events, such as made-for-TV public demonstrations, b) there is a Jewish lobby in America which demands such coverage, and c) American eno-romanticism feeds on emotional anti-establishment efforts of all sorts. The counter argument, of course, is that Soviet violations of the Helsinki agreements are news by anybody's definition.

While they are difficult to pinpoint, the fourth category of hindrances to freedom of information among nations seem to me the complex knot of cultural differences and national biases. The journalist as an individual is usually a product of the society for which he writes; the "world citizen" is a rarity among newsmen -- and perhaps has only limited value to readers whose point-of-view he does not share. Yet cultural habits and expectations cannot be ignored. In both the U.S.S.R. and China I have learned of reporting needlessly complicated by the American assumption that interviews are universal experiences, preferably done the American way. Not so. In both countries, initial interviews are likely as not to be quite unproductive. They are no place for a barrage of questions or the expectation of cogent, quotable responses. They more often serve as a preliminary match in which interviewer and subject spar a bit, leisurely (or seeming to be so) sizing each other up, waiting for a later meeting to get down to business.

The exclusive interview or even off-the-record private talk with a Russian or Chinese leader, even a lesser bureaucrat, is rare. The presence of a party representative or other functionary may stall the questioning while it intentionally 'protects' the dnterviewee from misquotation or a slip into confidences. The patience to work around such handicaps is sometimes missing in correspondents.

Bureaucracy itself is often too much for democratic journalists in Socialist settings. Frustration with the facelsss, impersonal, no-arguments difussion of

responsibility in vast systems leads the journalist to occasional depression or helpless rage. The physical rigors of cold, damp capitals like Moscow or Peking are mild comparedfto the recognition that one's work must often be accomplished in confromity with arbitrary or senseless rules and customs. No wonder that when correspondents meet for mutual consolation the talk is about the dead elevator to the sixth floor office or the long overdue parking permit as much as about the latest government pronouncement.

Intentions aside, a journalist's point of view may not be free of bias, or he may have an editor or publication whose policies are not objective. As an American correspondent found: "I mentioned in a profile that citizens here seem to think Leonid Brehznev looks good wearing glasses -- the way he's been shown on new government posters lately. I was talking about image-making as it happens to public officials here, but I heard from the desk at home that I'm not in Moscow to throw roses at Communists. Can I help it if he doesn't look like a thug ?"

While biases may shift with the winds of political change, journalists themselves may not be able to change -- and for honorable reasons. The job hazard remains, however, and with it the hazard to responsible international news.

If journalistic unpreparedness is also a form of bias -- the expectation that one does not really need to know a country's language, history, its cultural and social life in order to report its news -- then both China and the U.S.S.R. have at times been served by the ignorant and the arrogant. Furthermore, it seems to me that training for foreign correspondence as a journalist specialization has barely been approached seriously in America. Yet it rates more attention.

Surely communication systems and specialists are recognized as vital in the Soviet Union and China. In a Feb. 26, 1978 joint editorial issued by People's Daily, the Red Flag Journal and People's Liberation Army Daily these top Chinese media voices used the occasion of the national party congress to call for an economic

leap forward within the progress of "our continuous long march." The top priority -- ahead of national revenue, agricultural development, resources, power and transportation -- was "industrial development and communications." Clearly the Socialist countries and the Third World will find the means to communicate,. The manner in which it is done by them and by the rest of the earth's 211 nations must continue to concern all of us.